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Subject: ITC hit with water pollution criminal charges after Texas tank fire
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April 29 (Reuters) - Mitsui & Co Ltd's Intercontinental Terminals Co (ITC) faces five environmental criminal charges for the release last month of toxic chemicals from its Houston area petrochemical facility into waters that flow into the Gulf of Mexico, local officials said on Monday.

Following a three-day blaze that consumed 11 storage tanks at ITC's facility, a containment wall breach spilled toxic chemicals xylene and benzene into the waterway that connects Houston to the Gulf of Mexico, halting traffic in the nation's busiest oil port.

Evidence reviewed by the environmental crimes division of Harris County's district attorney's office showed water pollution rose to "criminal levels" for five days, establishing "probable cause to believe the company should be criminally charged for each day it violated the law," according to a statement by the Harris County district attorney. ITC could face penalties of up to \$100,000 for each of the five charges, Harris County said.

After a fire caused a dike at the facility to break, "large (and still unknown) quantities" of toxic chemicals, xylene and benzene, spilled into a nearby waterway for five days, Harris County District Attorney Kim Ogg said in a statement.

"The discharge from the ITC fire into Tucker Bayou is a clear water pollution case," Alex Forrest, an environmental crimes division chief prosecutor with the district attorney's office, said in a statement.

Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), the state's environmental regulatory authority, and Harris County filed a lawsuit late last month against ITC seeking civil penalties and the recovery of Harris County's costs of responding to the March fires.

Harris County's response cost at least \$1.9 million, after county employees devoted tens of thousands of work hours to firefighting, pollution control, public health and law enforcement departments, said Shain Carrizal, Harris County director of finance.